



LEWIS & CLARK CITY-COUNTY Health Department

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Limit Your Chances of Catching Norovirus this Holiday Season

The holiday season is known for office parties, get-togethers with family and friends. With winter weather confining people to enclosed indoor spaces, the chances of coming in contact with Norovirus increases. The Lewis and Clark City-County Health Department would like to remind residents to take precautions during this holiday season to protect themselves from this highly contagious virus. According to Laurel Riek, Environmental Health Specialist at the Health Department, "It is possible to keep it away from your family and friends. Share the fun, not the virus."

Norovirus, also commonly called the "stomach flu" causes nausea, abdominal cramps, vomiting, and diarrhea. A person is exposed when he or she gets the virus in their mouth from food, water, or other things that are put into the mouth (such as hands, toys, pacifiers, utensils, and cigarettes). Studies conducted by the Centers for Disease Control have indicated that roughly 40% of Norovirus cases were attributed to contaminated food. "Parties can bring a lot of hands in contact with displayed foods," Riek explains, "Take precautions by providing appropriate serving utensils and hand washing opportunities."

Contaminated hands spreads Norovirus if a person is shedding the virus and does not wash their hands well after using the bathroom. In addition, a person may also be exposed if they contact the virus while it is in the air contained in droplets. These infective droplets get into the air during episodes of vomiting, or from a toilet being flushed after an ill or recently ill person uses it. These droplets then land on surfaces including; sinks, tables, counters, toys, door handles, light switches, and faucets creating easy opportunities for exposure.

People may start to feel sick 12 - 48 hours after exposure and the illness may last from 12 hours to five days. In most healthy people, the illness usually is self-limiting and resolves itself in a few days. Rarely do people need medical attention, but the very young, the elderly and those with weakened immune systems are at risk for dehydration, that can lead to severe illness or death.

People who suspect they have Norovirus can protect their friends, co-workers and the community from this virus by:

- staying home while they have symptoms and trying to avoid direct contact with other people for at least 48 hours (two days) after your symptoms have gone.

- Do not prepare food while you have symptoms and for at least 48 hours after you recover from the illness. Riek adds, “Since the virus must be consumed, the easiest way to share it is with contaminated food.”
- If the party is scheduled for your home, cancel, move or postpone until you have recovered.

You can protect yourself and your family from contracting these viruses through good sanitary procedures:

- Wash your hands with soap and water thoroughly and frequently, especially before eating or otherwise touching your mouth and after using the restroom. Be aware that instant hand sanitizers don’t protect you from this virus.
- Disinfect surfaces with a chlorine bleach solution. Rinse off with clean water.
 - 5 TBS per gallon of water for food/mouth contact items
 - 1/3 cup bleach per gallon of water for non-porous surfaces
 - 1 and 2/3 cup bleach per gallon for porous surfaces (e.g. wooden floors)
- Immediately launder any soiled clothes or bedding.

“The single most important thing you can do to protect yourself against Norovirus is to wash your hands with soap and water. To protect the rest of the community, please stay home if you are sick and do not prepare food for your friends and family,” Riek advises.

For more information, call Laurel Riek at **447-8361** or visit www.co.lewis-clark.mt.us/health and click on Communicable Disease Control & Prevention.

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The Lewis & Clark City-County Health Department’s mission is to improve and protect the health of all Lewis & Clark County residents.